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Bosnian at Wilberforce University

Tom Archdeacon

As indelible memories go, this basketball moment will be a lot less traumatic than the first one.

Elmir Brkani? will be honored on the court tonight, February 13th, 2009, at Wilberforce University's Gaston Lewis Arena. It's Senior Night, and the 6-foot-5 forward from Bosnia likely will be playing his final home game for the Bulldogs, who face Pittsburgh's Point Park University.

Although he won't graduate until next December, he figures his four years of college basketball are about done.

That he is the only white player on the Bulldogs team—and, he believes, the only white male student on the campus of the historically acclaimed private black university—is a curious part of his tale, but not the most compelling part.

That involves his other four-year commitment, one that produced a hoops memory he'll never forget — though he wishes he could.

Brkani? grew up in Sarajevo and was 8 years old when the Bosnian War began. His city ended up surrounded by Serb forces, and that produced the longest siege in modern military history.

His stepfather, though Serbian, was fighting for the Bosnian Army. That left Elmir with his Bosnian Muslim mother who gave birth to his sister soon after the four-year war began.

“It was pretty rough for us,” he said. “We moved from our house to an apartment building because it had a basement, and we could hide there when they bombed us. For two years, we didn't have any school, then they tried to teach us in the basements, too.

“The enemy cut our electricity and water, so every day I had to go out to get water. It was scary because there were snipers, but we were still kids.”

And so sometimes when he was supposed to get water, he said he'd stop at a basketball hoop that was still standing and shoot around: “But one day my (cousin) — he was maybe 14 — was playing basketball out there and was killed by a grenade.”

He said several other relatives and friends were killed in war. In all, it's estimated there were over 100,000 civilian and military casualties, and another 1.8 million people were displaced. Some 30 percent of the victims were women and children.

“The time I was most scared was when I was getting water, and a woman maybe two feet away from me was shot in the stomach by a sniper,” he said. “I remember a neighbor pulling me to the side of the street until the shooting stopped.”

His voice trailed off.

“Those memories,” he finally said, “really affected me.”

Five years after the war ended, his reunited family came to America in search of a better life. Unfortunately, their first day in the United States — in New York City, no less — was Sept. 10, 2001.

“We were headed to Louisville, but our flight was delayed,” Brkani? said. “We left the next morning — September 11th — just an hour before the thing happened. We didn’t know about it until we got to the (Louisville) airport and saw it on TV.

“I remember my mom saying, ‘Maybe we just have bad luck. We’ve just come from one war into another.’ “

He said his parents never got comfortable here: “The crisis of 9/11 was a big breaking point for them. They never really adapted here.”

His transition was made easier by basketball. He played two years at Western High School in Louisville, then went to Southwestern Illinois College, a two-year school in Belleville. While there, he was spotted by a Wilberforce assistant coach who recruited him to the school in the fall of 2004.

Although Brkani? started to work out with the team, he soon left school — before playing a game — to help his parents move back to Sarajevo, where they took over his grandfather’s grocery store.

When he decided to return to America, he wrote Wilberforce coach Geoff Warren a couple of heartfelt letters and was taken back for the 2006-07 school year.

“When I wanted to finish college, there was only one place I wanted to be,” he said. “I wanted to be back at Wilberforce — my school.”

After Brkani? returned, he and his Bulldog teammates were at a tournament in Florida when he was approached by a white player from another team who had just one question:

“Why are you playing for a black team?”

Recounting the moment as he sat in the Wilberforce gym late one night after a game this week, the 24-year-old Brkani? just shrugged at how simple his answer was:

“I like it here. This is the oldest private African-American university in the whole country, and I’m really honored to be here and learn more about their history and culture.

“I’m one of the oldest guys on the team now and I’m one of the longest here, so I really do feel like this is my home. The other guys, we’re like a big family. We travel together, eat every day together, tell jokes. And the coach has really helped me. Everybody has embraced me. This is really a special place for me.”

With him the race issue isn't a factor. "Sarajevo is known as the Jerusalem of Europe," he said of the city where Islam, Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Judaism have coexisted for centuries.

"Growing up like I did — in a mixed household (Muslim and Serb) — I don't care what race you are, what religion you are. I look at the person. Do you have a good heart?"

On the court, he's had some real contributions, but again this year his season was interrupted by a fall internship. Against Mount Vernon Nazarene the other night, he had two points, two rebounds and a steal in 13 minutes.

But the biggest thing in his life this school year happened off the court.

"In October, I became a U.S. citizen," he said proudly. "When I took the oath at the ceremony in Louisville, I felt great because I believe I've become part of something big now.

"And then Obama won the president. His father was from Kenya — an immigrant just like me. So now I can really see myself as a real American, a Bosnian-American."

And he said he owes so much of it to basketball.

The sport helped him adjust to this country when he first got here, and it got him an education.

And when it takes him onto the court tonight — accompanied by his fiancée, Armina Krgo — it may help him forget a little more of that other indelible hoops image from that rough time back home.

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